

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The first time I seriously considered cutting off all my hair was immediately after I graduated high school. I got tired of spending so much time and money relaxing my hair when it never looked like I wanted it to look for any length of time. I hated thinking about it so much. I had things to do, places to go, people to see, and goals to accomplish, so the idea of getting rid of my hair and its maintenance tempted me. I would occasionally mention this to my parents, but evidently as a light-skinned Black woman I was under some special obligation to have long hair. So, I kept my relaxed hair short, which my dad really disliked. In my early twenties, the urge to cut off my hair grew stronger. I didn't like not being able to spontaneously go swimming or hiking or anything I enjoyed. My hair's interference with my sex life was especially irritating. But no matter much I wanted to cut my hair off, I was afraid of what my bald head might look like and how people might respond to it. Who would I be without relaxed hair? Could I still be pretty? By the time I reached my mid-twenties, I worked an extremely high-pressure corporate job at an asset management company, assisting with the maintenance and disposition of nearly half a billion dollars' worth of commercial and residential properties across several states. My real estate portfolio was worth nearly twenty million dollars. And, of course, I was the only person of color for miles around. Could I do my job without straight hair?

Asset management paid well, but it wasn't for me. I couldn't justify being so stressed while doing something I hated doing. I resigned from the company after a few years and thought about what to do next. I always wanted to try writing as a full-time profession, but my parents discouraged me from pursuing it. After all, I couldn't be a "starving artist" now, with two children to support. I continued writing as a hobby, and occasionally I was lucky enough to get something published, but I wanted a full-time job where writing played a key role in my work. Thanks in part to the writing credits I did have, I somehow landed a job in the marketing/public relations department at a local community college. The job allowed me to put all my communications skills to work, finding the best ways to present ideas to different audiences, especially with writing. It was a high-pressure job as well, but I loved it. But loving it didn't stop it from being stressful.

In addition to work, I was raising my daughter Jasmine and my son Noah on my own. I was making my way out of a very traumatic relationship with Noah's father involving domestic violence. I left the house he and I shared and moved back in with my parents. Then my hair started falling out. Big clumps would remain in the sink after I washed my hair, and even bigger clumps would stay behind in the comb when I combed my hair. This new development helped me finally decide to do away with my hair and put myself out of my misery. I went to the barber shop closest to my house early one Saturday morning, so I could be the first one in the chair when it opened. I got one of the barbers to give me a short fade. When I left the shop, I bought several new pairs of earrings.

The air circulating around my head once my hair was cut was a great sensation. I could feel layers of negative energy leaving my body. I was confident in a way I never experienced before. My boss and co-workers reacted with a bit of shock, but they got used to it. I became more talkative and shared more feedback during staff and team meetings post-haircut, and my boss appreciated the boost of assertiveness. My kids thought the haircut was strange – Jasmine didn't like me having hair "like a man," and Noah rubbed my head and laughed hysterically the first time he saw my haircut, saying, "your head is so big and round mom, like the moon!" I dealt with all the responses to my hair (or the lack thereof) with humor and grace. What was not humorous was how my parents responded to my shorn locks. They didn't like my super short cut, and they were quite blunt about how horrible it made me look. My mom also wondered aloud if my frustration with my son's father made me "go over to the other side." She worried a great deal about my potential lesbianism, saying "don't give up on all of them because of a few bad apples."

It was just as well my hair was so short, because the stress in my life continued to increase. My son Noah was autistic, and his autism was manifesting itself in extremely problematic behavior in school. My son would throw desks and chairs and hit other students, and rarely stayed in his seat in class. Hardly a day went by without a call from his principal, and at least twice a week I was leaving my office to go to the school to deal with some crisis. On top of this, I was still in the process of moving back into my parents' house with my two children as my relationship ended. My work performance began to suffer, and my supervisors were not sympathetic or accommodating. I knew I was nearing my breaking point and something would have to give. I would have to seriously consider leaving the nine-to-five world, at least for a while. There was no way I

could be fully present at a job. But how would this work? How I would support my family? How would I get enough money to move back out of my parents' house into my own place? I thought about all my skills, talents and abilities, and all the people I knew. How I could I (legally) make money without a traditional job? After a good deal of thought, I figured maybe I could pick up some freelance writing work. I had some media contacts thanks to my public relations job. Could they help put me in touch with editors and writing opportunities? Could I be a professional writer? Maybe this was my chance to find out.

I left my job and began writing. I managed to catch some breaks, including an opportunity to write for Baltimore's alternative weekly newspaper from time to time, which opened lots of doors for me as a writer. Between freelance writing and introducing some strategically placed government assistance into my world, I managed to create a reasonably stable existence for my family once we got settled in my parents' home. Most importantly, my time was entirely my own. I made my own schedule. I made time to get my son to the services he needed, and to raise my daughter in a more hands-on way. I even homeschooled her for a bit of time. My mom watched my kids whenever I needed, and I spent my nights writing. Money still tended to be scarce, so I couldn't afford salon visits. Eventually I stopped going to the barbershop and started letting my hair grow back out, but I didn't go back to relaxing my hair. My dad didn't understand how I was surviving without a job, and he especially didn't understand what was going on with my hair. But as always, my dad had a plan for my hair. My dad started offering me money to get my hair relaxed. He also decided the best way to get me to agree to relaxing my hair was to have my mother do the offering. He and I hadn't been on great terms since he traumatized my daughter with his comments about her hair a while back, and while there was no problem with me and my kids moving back home when my domestic situation became an abusive one, my dad and I were still distant. I suppose he thought my mom might be able to create a path of less resistance.

It started off casually, so casually in fact I didn't even notice what I was being set up for at first. One day my mom said to me, "Tula, I know you are kind of in a hard place right now with money. How about I treat you to a day at the salon, let you get your hair done?" I responded with, "I appreciate the offer mom, but I'm good. Why don't you treat yourself to something?" I genuinely thought it was just a kind gesture on her part. She made the same offer to me a few weeks later. A month or so later she offered to give me money to get my hair done along with a few dollars for my pocket. "Look, I know you'd love to get your hair fixed properly," she said. "It might cheer you up. In fact, I know it would. Tell you what. How about I give you money to get your hair done and fifty dollars for yourself?" Then I knew the fix was in. I didn't even bother to get angry at her. I just added it to the list of disappointments I kept in my head when it came to my mom. I shook my head no, told her it wasn't necessary, and went on my way. My refusal made my dad even more determined to somehow force me to get my hair relaxed. The next time I was offered one hundred dollars in addition to the costs of relaxing my hair. I was totally broke, which made turning the money down even more difficult. I was struggling to keep my car insured and out of the repo man's hands, but I said no. The next time the offer was one hundred fifty dollars. Then two hundred dollars. I needed the money. I wanted the money. But I refused to take the money. They knew I needed it but wouldn't let me have it unless I straightened my hair.

In time the offers stopped coming from my mother and started coming directly from my dad. The dollar amounts increased too, but now I dealt with the "bad cop" approach he used instead of the "good cop" touch my mother applied. He said, "You know you need this money," and "Stop being so stubborn," and "I don't understand what is wrong with you." When he offered five hundred dollars and I turned it down, his frustration exploded. "Petula, I don't know what is wrong with you. You aren't an ugly girl at all. Why would someone as pretty and light-skinned as you want to go around with a knotty head? It doesn't look right! Your hair is supposed to be straight." I didn't even bother to acknowledge the comment. I just walked away.

The last time he offered me money, there was no conversation. As I came home one day, my dad was sitting on the porch. I nodded curtly and mumbled a greeting as I went into the house. I found it fanned across the dining room table in a big wide arc. Twenty-dollar bills. One thousand dollars, arranged in a semi-circle around a Dark and Lovely relaxer kit. The bills were all crisp and brand new, fanned atop a white lace doily. I sat down at the table to count the money. I left an hour later, after carefully re-arranging the bills back on top of the doily around the relaxer box. I left a note saying, "Not For Sale." Later I washed my hair, twisted it up, went to bed, and fluffed my hair out into a big beautiful Afro the following morning. It looked great. I felt great.

My car got repossessed that afternoon.

Once I realized I would need to leave the nine-to-five workplace to manage my son's autism, I also realized I needed to get creative about making money. I signed my kids up for medical assistance. I didn't try to get my car back when it got repossessed. I just let it go. I couldn't afford a car anyway. My son got a small amount of Supplemental Security Income monthly because his autism was considered a disability, and I signed up for food stamps. I also started freelance writing in earnest. Once I wrote a couple of pieces for *City Paper*, the alternative weekly newspaper in Baltimore, I parlayed those bylines into semi-regular freelance writing for other publications. Most of my writing was around arts, entertainment, and culture, and I met lots of creative types – artists who I got to know first as subjects of my writing, and then as friends and colleagues. These relationships led to all kinds of new opportunities for me. I dabbled in marketing, promotions, grant writing for a few artists, and even event production and stage management. I learned about audio recording, staging, lighting, photography and videography. I picked up some rudimentary graphic design skills. I took on freelance editing work. I helped run a small online magazine. I booked talent at shows and nightclubs. I lived a double life. During the day I took my son to appointments and homeschooled my daughter, trying to maintain a secure life for them. I pursued my artistic and creative life at night and on weekends.

Like lots of single mothers before me, I discovered selling sex, or at least the idea of sex, in some form or fashion could make decent sums of money without a nine-to-five occupation. While this was true, I wasn't prepared to take my place on a pole just yet. Instead I wrote erotic short stories and sold them. I published an erotica anthology. I performed erotic spoken word poetry, recorded and sold an erotic poetry CD, and even fronted a small band to accompany my poetry. I named the band "Luvstruck," and revived my performing chops from childhood, doing shows up and down the East Coast. We typically had anywhere from three to five musicians in the band, depending on the venue, and I even had a backup singer or two sometimes. I would dress in corsets and garter belts and stockings and six-inch heels on stage, performing my poems and songs, and telling raunchy stories. My band and I would load up a big rented SUV on Friday nights or Saturday mornings when we travelled to shows, always making sure I could be back by Monday morning for my kids. Oftentimes when driving back from Charlotte, North Carolina or New York City or Philadelphia or wherever we had been that weekend at some ungodly hour, I would stop by a 24-hour grocery store so I could return home and stock our kitchen with groceries. When my children figured out I always had money when I returned from my weekends away, they began to wait at the door for me, hands outstretched, both saying in the sweetest but somehow most threatening voices imaginable, "How much money did you bring us this time mommy?" I began working this routine into my act, placing a large tip jar onstage at shows, telling my audiences I had two little pimps at home that I'd given birth to, and I couldn't return to them without their money. This always made the crowds laugh, and they filled the jar to overflowing. If I booked a show that was too far away to drive to and from over the course of a weekend, I would go alone by plane, performing a stripped-down version of the show without music. All these endeavors kept me busy, but not always well-compensated, because there were always times when I couldn't find shows or I couldn't be away for whatever reason. During these times, I would have to resort to other measures, and one of those measures was going to employment agencies to apply for temporary assignments. It wasn't always possible for me to do this, but when necessary I would force my worlds to calm down for four to twelve-week intervals, so I could go to work.

The first time I did this, I had been out of the traditional workplace a few years. I still possessed skills the workplace needed, but my appearance was no longer traditional workplace appropriate. I gave up many of my work clothes for casual, "artsy" attire, and my natural hair was styled in a big kinky-curly Afro. My accessories were large, and colorful, and eye-catching. Even my purse was a huge, beaded fringed bag I could throw everything into, including snacks or a change of clothes if I did a show after work. I struggled to pull myself together for job interviews. I wasn't as polished as I needed to be to get the jobs paying what I needed to make – the administrative assistant jobs. This was confirmed for me when the first few employment agencies I approached offered me manufacturing assignments. These were long-term temp assignments at factories on the outskirts of the city like the Sweetheart Cup Company and Proctor and Gamble. These assignments paid anywhere from nine to eleven dollars an hour, which was okay, but there was the added headache of a two-plus hour commute on public transportation to get to work. To me the commute made it more trouble than it was worth. Administrative assistant work started at twelve dollars an hour, and usually the assignments were

downtown, which was much easier to get to on public transportation. But those jobs weren't being offered to me.

I took out the wig my dad gave me when I was sixteen. It was the only one I'd kept of the four he gave me. I bought some wig spray and a brush and freshened it up. I styled it, trimming it until the length came a bit past my shoulders. I curled it with big rollers, and twisted my own hair so it would lay flat against my head under the wig cap. I approached another agency with my new appearance on a Tuesday. By Thursday, I was someone's executive assistant, answering phones and typing emails for fifteen dollars an hour in the heart of downtown, with only a thirty-minute commute to and from home. I did this employment dance for about seven years. I would go months writing, planning, producing, performing, and managing my way into generating income. But when those methods failed to give me the money I needed to support my family, I pulled out the wig and went back into the traditional work world for a while.

I hated the wig. I hated wearing it. I hated the bondage wearing it represented. Financial bondage. Bondage to workplace norms insisting my natural hair wasn't appropriate. By the end of the work day, I would have a pounding headache because I stuffed my huge Afro underneath it. I hated the way white people talked to me when I wore it. I hated the familiar way they interacted with me. I especially hated hearing the things they'd say about the other Black people around us because they thought I was one of them. At the end of each work day, I walked into my parents' house, wearing the wig my dad gave me all those years ago. I would go to my room, the same room I lived in as a teenager and was living in now since I'd moved back home. I would sit on the corner of the bed I slept in as a teenager, in the exact same spot I sat when my dad first gave me those God-awful wigs. And as I sat in this spot well over a decade later, I took off the wig I was too proud to wear back then, and I would cry, feeling like the most hypocritical, abject failure imaginable. I tried working harder to stay out of the nine-to-five world. I did more writing. I took on more projects, booked more shows, and worked with more artists on various endeavors. I pinched my pennies until they begged for mercy, but no matter how hard I tried, I always ended up having to take out my wig to make money for my family.

I took a long-term temporary assignment at a company in White Marsh, a Baltimore suburb, as a receptionist. It was a well-paying assignment at sixteen dollars per hour. The job involved sitting at a large ornate desk in the building's front lobby, answering the switchboard and the front door buzzer, greeting visitors, directing them to offices, signing for packages, distributing mail, photocopying and faxing documents, and helping with administrative tasks around the office. Although White Marsh wasn't far from me, the office was about a mile and a half from the nearest bus stop, so I would get off the bus and make a twenty-two-minute walk from the bus stop to the office every morning, walking along a road not really intended for pedestrians. But the sixteen dollars an hour was too good to turn down. Venetian blinds hung from the lobby's floor to ceiling darkly tinted windows. I worked there four days a week, and I would often stare out those darkly tinted windows from my desk, admiring the beautiful trees and warm sunny weather outside. It made me a little sad.

The office wasn't a busy one at all. Sometimes hours might go by with little for me to do. At the time I was doing book reviews for *City Paper* from time to time, and my editor assigned me a fascinating book called "*Here Lies Jim Crow: Civil Rights In Maryland.*" It was written by the highly respected NPR News journalist and reporter C. Fraser Smith. I was reading the book to review it and in preparation to interview Smith. I was a fan of C. Fraser Smith, and often listened to him on the local NPR radio station, WYPR-FM. The book was nearly 250 pages long, and I needed to read the book quickly, so I asked my boss if it would be okay to read a book at my desk during my down time. My boss knew I was a freelance writer for *City Paper*, and he was impressed by the fact when I interviewed for the position. My boss said it would be perfectly fine to read my book after I completed my other tasks. I thanked him for the accommodation, and the next day I brought "*Here Lies Jim Crow: Civil Rights In Maryland*" to work.

I didn't think anything of it at the time. After all, this was a book about the Civil Rights movement. I thought everyone, absolutely *everyone*, including white people, officially agreed the Civil Rights movement was a good thing. I thought we all recognized it helped this country make great and necessary strides in its history. Most right-thinking Americans were on the same page on this one. After all, white people loved themselves some Martin Luther King Jr., arguably the most iconic leader of the movement. Or so I'd heard. Right? Who would take issue with a locally based, historical account of some of the key people and events in the Civil Rights Movement, written by a highly respected and award-winning journalist and reporter?

No one noticed the book the first day. It was a typically quiet day in the lobby with no visitors, and I got to read a great deal of the book undisturbed. I was glad, because I had a lot of work to do. I was planning to read through the whole book a couple of times before I started taking notes and framing my interview questions for Smith, and I was glad the lobby was so quiet. The second and third days were also quiet. I was able to get my first read-throughs done. On the fourth day, I took my seat behind the desk in the front lobby, settled in, and I took the book out of my bag. It was quiet on this day too, and as I cracked open the book, I heard footsteps. My boss' voice boomed in my direction. "Good morning Petula. Is that the book?" I nodded as my boss walked over to my desk, and I handed the book to him. He took a closer look. "Civil rights in Maryland, huh," he muttered, almost to himself.

"Yes. Civil rights in Maryland," I repeated back to him. "It's a really insightful account of this area's leaders, very well researched, too," I added. "The guy who wrote this book, C. Fraser Smith, also wrote the book about William Donald Schaefer from a couple of years back. It was really popular." As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I felt bad. I knew I said it to placate the white man who was troubled by seeing a book about the Civil Rights Movement on my desk. I said it to let him know I wasn't reading some anger-filled, hate-laced, kill-whitey diatribe. Pointing out C. Fraser Smith as the author was another subtle reminder of the book's scholarly intent, which would make my boss feel safer. His next comment let me know I read him correctly. He said, "You know a book about civil rights could make some people uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" I asked as innocently as I could, while I seethed inside.

"Yes. You know what I mean. Not me necessarily. But we do have clients visiting our offices."

My tolerance was wearing a bit thin. I pointedly stared at the empty lobby. This was the fourth day the lobby was empty. "Well, yes," I said. "From time to time people do come in."

"I just don't want there to be any misunderstandings about your reading material. Maybe you could read something a little less...inflammatory."

"In-flam-matory," I repeated back to him, slowly.

"Yes," he responded. Then he paused and added, "How about *Walden*?"

"*Walden*," I said, confused.

"Yes. *Walden*."

"As in Henry David Thoreau? *Walden Pond Walden*?"

"Yes. You could read it." And abruptly, he walked away.

I have nothing against *Walden*. I read it several times, starting in middle school. I just thought his mentioning it was odd. I looked over at my book, thinking about the empty refrigerator at my mom's house. I put the book away. For the next few days, I did not read anything at the front desk, and when my boss would come by my desk, we'd chat, but he made no other comments about appropriate reading material.

A few days later, one of my best friends named Donnell texted me to see how I was doing. I texted back, telling him I was on a temp assignment, which turned out to be near where he worked. He offered to come take me to lunch, which I happily accepted. When Donnell pulled up in front of the offices and I came outside, he didn't recognize me. When I got into his car and he realized it was me, he laughed hysterically at my appearance. We got lunch at Noodles & Company, and he cracked on my wig steadily for the first ten minutes. After he noticed I wasn't laughing along with him, he asked, "But why is this necessary Tula?" It's the twenty-first century for God's sake."

I told him even though I thought it was crazy too, there were white people who really thought I was white when I wore the wig, despite my other features. (Black people mostly knew I was Black, and only occasionally thought I was bi-racial.) Even the white people who knew I was Black were still more comfortable with me because I was light skinned. Wearing this wig increased my hourly rate of pay by an average of five dollars per assignment. This wig kept my commute down to a reasonable amount of time. I told him how I'd seen this kind of disparity all my life. I even told him stories of how I stood in lines at grocery stores, at banks, at department stores, watching cashiers wait on brown-skinned Black customer after brown-skinned Black customer with some level of irritation, but they would suddenly find themselves able to be extremely courteous and cordial when it was time to wait on me. I also watched these cashiers do the exact same thing when waiting on white people.

My friend listened, saying nothing. I realized I was raising my voice. "I'm sorry Donnell. I don't mean to fuss at you. I'm just frustrated." He smiled sympathetically and asked, "Tula, is it really worth it? You seem

so stressed. And I know your head hurts. I can't imagine how you got your big head and your big Afro under there. What about the freelance writing? Aren't you making money writing?"

I laughed and took "*Here Lies Jim Crow*" out of my bag. I showed it to him, explaining it was the book I was currently reviewing as a freelance article, and although my boss originally agreed to let me read the book during my down time at the front desk in preparation for my review, he then objected when he saw the book, expressing concerns on how a book about civil rights might make visitors to the office uncomfortable.

Donnell was quiet again. We got in his car and drove back to my job. Before I got out he said, "Tula, you know you gotta get out of there, right?"

When I sat down at my desk after lunch, I found something there waiting for me. It was a small pile of several full-color booklets of varying sizes, with a note from my boss attached. "We're having a big meeting over the next two days, and a lot of people will be coming into the office. I just wanted to make sure appropriate reading material was at your desk when they are here."

The booklets were company catalogs detailing all the products the company sold. I was working for a company who manufactured gums that helped stabilize and texturize foods and beverages. The gums increased the shelf life of products in stores. The company was full of chemists and research and development technicians who studied food properties and how to enhance them without negatively impacting those properties. It wasn't the kind of company producing something of interest to a layperson such as myself. These catalogs the boss left on my desk were catalogs salespeople took out to potential clients like food manufacturing companies, large restaurant chains and so on. These catalogs described the benefits of xanthan gum and carrageenan, complete with glossy pictures and testimonials from satisfied customers. This was what I was expected to "read" while visitors were in the office instead of a book about the Marylanders who were heroes in the civil rights movement.

I gathered up my things, making sure the offensive book was with me, walked across the lobby and strolled out the front door. I paused just long enough to look back at my desk, remove my wig, and drop it to the floor. I left it in the doorway as I stepped into the bright sunshine outside and started to make my mile and a half long trek down to the bus stop.

My mom was sitting on the porch when I got home. As I walked up the porch steps, she looked at me and immediately noticed the absence of the wig. "Petula, where is your wig? Did it come off? I can give you money to buy another one if you need one. You look so pretty in it."

I went in the house and immediately started work on the book review. The review led to four other recurring paid assignments. I didn't do temp work for over a year and a half. I didn't make enough money to move out of my mother's house, but I made enough to keep my soul.